

The Controversial Rise in Manimony

Women have worked so hard to get this far and make some serious cash — so why should they have to pay alimony to their exes?

Plus, find out how much Hollywood's highest-paid female stars have shelled out to their exes.

By Hilary Stout



Samantha London was a pretty, 24-year-old secretary when she met her future husband. He was in his 50s, a charming and successful businessman, making a half-million dollars a year. When she was 26, they began dating. When she was 28, they got married. It was her first marriage, his fifth. London could easily have enjoyed the good life as a trophy wife, but she had ambitions beyond cocktail parties and going to the gym. While they were dating, she quit her \$35,000-per-year secretary job and landed a sales position at a real estate firm. She worked hard — and she had the touch. Her first year, she earned \$100,000. The next year, her take was \$500,000. Soon, she says, she was topping \$1 million.

As her career soared, her husband's company faltered, then folded. But for the first time in his life, he was married to a woman who worked. So he didn't rush to find another job. He kicked back, dabbled in real estate, and earned enough to pay a few bills but not much else. While she

was working 15- and 16-hour days, he could be found at home, noodling on the computer. Within three years, her resentment grew so overwhelming that she asked to end the marriage. But for that to happen, London, now 38, had to agree to pay her 66-year-old ex-husband an out-of-court settlement of \$200,000.

It's a rueful milestone in our inexorable march to equality: Across the nation, divorce courts are increasingly ordering women to pay "manimony" (called "maintenance" or "support" in some states) to their ex-husbands. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, men represented just over 2 percent of the 448,000 Americans who received alimony in 2000. Nine years later (the latest year for which statistics are available), that figure had quadrupled. "I probably had three cases involving women paying maintenance over the past five years. Now I have three cases at the same time," says Marta Papa, a St. Louis divorce attorney.

Since in most states alimony awards are based on nothing but cold, hard economics — the one who makes the most money pays — it is, without a doubt, one more mark of women's achievements in the professional world that so many more are shelling out manimony to their exes. But ask any woman who's had to write that check how she feels about it, and brace yourself for some serious blowback. "Women having to pay spousal support are the most difficult clients to represent because they are so damn angry," observes Lisa Helfend Meyer, a family law attorney in Los Angeles. "They

are offended by the notion that they would have to continue to pay for an able-bodied man."

Especially when that able-bodied man likely kicked in very little around the house. Helfend Meyer cites the resentment among her successful female clients who insist that, even as they tended to their demanding careers — fielding calls at all hours, working weekends — they still managed to, as she puts it, "do everything" when it came to the kids and the household. Good luck finding a male exec who could rattle off the names of his kids' teachers, coaches, and pediatricians the way Mom can, even as Mom runs a multimillion-dollar business.

"My guess is a lot of the anger is because they were pulling more than their weight in the marriage," says lawyer Linda Hirshman, author of *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World*. Not just earning more money, she stresses, but "bearing the lion's share of the domestic labor." Add to that the fact that in many so-called no-fault divorce states, such as California and New York, the reason for the breakup can't be used in determining alimony. "He can be a serial cheater and she still has to pay support," says Helfend Meyer. "I see cases like that all the time."

And just as men have long griped that alimony condemns them to stifling careers just to support their ex-wives' Neiman Marcus habits, some women find it galling that their financial obligations to their exes limit their lifestyle choices. Papa, the St. Louis divorce attorney, is currently mediating a case involving a 40-something couple with school-age children. The wife, a corporate bigwig, earns about \$500,000 per year in salary and bonus. The husband stopped working early in the marriage to become their children's primary caregiver. Now he wants alimony for life, claiming his stay-at-home-dad status has irrevocably damaged his career. She's thinking of scaling back, maybe even remarrying, and doesn't want to be locked in to her demanding job just to pay alimony.

"Her argument is, 'Look, I work 100 hours a week. I'm burning out. I want to quit my job, but I can't if I have to pay you maintenance,'" says Papa, who isn't sure how the case will work out. After all, she notes, if the roles were reversed, any judge would tell the man: too bad. "They would say, 'You have a family to support.' I've seen them say that to men for so long. Now there's been a huge shift in the way courts are treating women during divorce."

That's the situation Liane Bruno-Bathey, 43, of La Jolla, California, finds herself in today. Every two weeks, she writes her unemployed ex-husband a check for \$2,727 in alimony and child support, even though their two teens are with her most days. But that's not all. About half-way into their 15-year marriage, Bruno-Bathey started a business — a record-keeping firm for IRA accounts. Her husband had nothing to do with the endeavor. Still, under California law he was entitled to half the value of it when they divorced. She now owes him about \$1 million, which she will pay out in several lump sums over the next five years.

"It's difficult to swallow," Bruno-Bathey says, though she concedes that she's in a better position than the countless divorcées who are financially dependent on their exes. "It does, in a sense, give you a feeling of success and empowerment. I'm able to take care of myself, my children — and my ex-husband, for whatever that's worth," she says. According to their divorce decree, Bruno-Bathey's ex can't seek any more money, even if her business suddenly takes off. There is solace in this. "It does give me a little more motivation to make my business more successful than what it was during my marriage," she adds with a sly laugh.

Meantime, the rest of her life is back on track. She's since remarried — to "an amazing man," she says. "So this story will have the ultimate happy ending in December 2015" — the date of her last alimony payment.

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